

When **Desmond Smith** visited his alma mater in the Eastern Cape he found a vibrant community succeeding against all odds.

# BEACON OF HOPE

**S**anlam Chairman Desmond Smith's return to his alma mater in the tiny town of Indwe in the Eastern Cape was an emotional experience – one which no one who was present will forget.

He visited his school, Indwe High School, as part of Sanlam's Back-to-School Executive Project.

Desmond was a learner at Indwe High School from 1957 until he matriculated in 1964 with an 'A' aggregate. His dad was the town's bank manager for those seven years – a time which Desmond remembers with great fondness.

## Childhood memories

In the 1890s Indwe became the fourth town in the country to receive electricity. The coal mine on the hill above the town and its adjoining power station and railway line were central to the town's early prosperity.

At the time Desmond lived there the mine had been closed down but the power station was still operational. 'The power plant shut down every evening at nine,' he recalls with a laugh. 'After that we had to resort to candles.' In spite of the vagaries of the power supply, back then Indwe was still a bustling agricultural centre.

'I had a fantastic childhood in Indwe,' Desmond remembers. 'I played golf, tennis and cricket, but I also had a great time in class. It was a small school – there were only nine of us in matric – with a limited curriculum, which meant I did both woodwork and typing at different stages in my academic career!'

'But it was blessed with amazing long-serving teachers who would do anything for their learners.'

## Reflections on return

He was shocked to see the state of the town now. 'Apart from the tarred main road, all the other streets were riddled with bunker-like potholes. My kids were amazed – they had no idea places like this even existed.'

Indwe is officially one of the 10 poorest municipalities in the country. On pension day it's so crowded you can barely move, but for the rest of the month it's a veritable ghost town. Indwe High School is, in short, a flagship for the failings of the Eastern Cape.

This makes the school's achievements all the more incredible.

'In the midst of all the destitution,' enthuses Desmond, 'was this shining beacon of hope. The school was neat, and the learners were well dressed and polite.'



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'The only change from when I was there was that the boys could now sing! The school choir put on a performance that sent shivers down my spine.'

If you look deeper, the school's performance is even more astounding. For 15 of the past 17 years it has achieved a 100% matric pass rate.

Past learners include lawyers, doctors, actuaries, geologists, IT graduates and two PhD students.

All this has been achieved with limited physical resources but a fantastic team of teachers comprising local farmers' wives as well as a growing contingent of teachers from neighbouring African countries. Principal Christine van Pletzen says although they are a diverse bunch, they are united in their goal of delivering quality education at a price that is affordable in this community.

## Sanlam's helping hand

Regular cuts in the municipal water supply caused the school to close on a number of occasions, and an insufficient number of toilets meant learners often missed lessons to avoid break-time queues. 'Put simply, these basic needs were negatively impacting our learners' academic performance.'

Sanlam's helping hand 'means more to the learners than you will ever imagine', Christine says. With Sanlam's donation a rainwater-harvesting system could be installed and the learners' ablution facilities upgraded.

Adele Latchman, Foundation Manager, says Sanlam usually prefers rather to invest in educational development and teacher training than in basic infrastructure, 'but in this case we had to make an exception'.

'Seeing how Christine and her team have made every cent count makes our investment very worthwhile.'

Next year Sanlam is hoping to improve the school's access to computers and the internet – a step which is intended to benefit the community as a whole, not just the learners.

Desmond may have visited Indwe only twice since he matriculated, but he will definitely be back next year and in 2015 to continue checking up on the work of the Sanlam Foundation.

'This has been one of the most humbling experiences of my life. To see how much these teachers and learners can achieve with so little is a lesson to all of us, and it makes me optimistic about the future of our country.'

1 Desmond Smith was head boy of his school in 1964.

2 Desmond cuts a ribbon to celebrate the new water tanks, with Christine van Pletzen, Principal of Indwe High School.

3 Desmond had a red-carpet reception when he visited the school. 4 Handing out goodie bags and food parcels to learners. 5 Desmond with his former school friends, Arthur (left) and Peter Stotter. 6 Indwe High School's 2013 prefects.

**'The new bathrooms are breathtakingly elegant and we will make sure they stay this way so future learners can also have the opportunity to enjoy them.'** SIHLE MPATENI